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*Profile: Ritchie Torres*

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In early 2012, Ritchie Torres was doing pushups in the hallway. Torres had arrived late—again—to his internship at Bronx City Councilmember James Vacca's office, and his supervisor, Jeremy Warneke, was punishing the college dropout as only an ex-military man would.

Less than two years from that moment, Ritchie Torres would be elected as the youngest member of the New York City Council at 25. He would be the first openly gay Councilmember elected in the Bronx, the borough he calls the "Bible belt" of New York City. He would be appointed chairman of the committee on Public Housing. He would attract the attention of media, both local and national. But for the moment, his face was to the ground.

He wasn't responding to the external discipline. "I'm someone who works well with freedom," Torres explained recently in a phone interview.

But things soon changed. Warneke began finding Torres at the office working nights and weekends. Vacca took notice too, and soon appointed Torres as his housing director. In unannounced visits to decrepit buildings, Torres threatened negligent landlords with publicizing the living conditions or filing lawsuits. It became the stuff of neighborhood lore. From there, he won his own seat on the council.

"I was given more time to focus on issues I cared about," he said.

Torres' stunning and improbable ascent from tardy intern to council wunderkind was only the latest in a lifetime of accomplishment fueled by a relentless drive when it comes to the things he cares about—and a willingness to overlook the things he doesn't.

Torres was raised by a single mother in the projects in Throgs Neck, an area on the outskirts of the Bronx. His mother was a hard worker, he said, but work was hard to come by. He was exposed early to the role government assistance programs can play in people's lives. "If it weren't for public housing, my mother and I would have been homeless," he said.

Though the housing projects supported his family through difficult times, he found the living conditions difficult. Alongside the disintegrating infrastructure, he found a social environment at odds with his emerging sexuality.

"I was in the closet for much of my childhood," he said. "When you grow up gay in the projects, you fear violence."

Torres found the confidence to come out publically in high school, after finding out on MySpace that one of his teachers was gay.

"It took the visibility of just one person for me to come out," Torres said. That visibility had a lasting impression on Torres, who has begun promoting plans for a flashy LGBT community center to be built in the Bronx.

Torres attended Herbert H. Lehman High School in the Bronx, where he neglected his classwork to focus on his real passion: moot court, where students work with local law firms to argue cases styled after the lofty issues considered by the Supreme Court. There, he said, he discovered his penchant for public speaking, and worked tirelessly on his argumentation skills.

His enthusiasm for moot court paid off. Torres led Lehman to two consecutive citywide moot court championships, launching his school, better known for its athleticism than scholastic prowess, ahead of some of New York's academic powerhouses, including Stuyvesant and Brooklyn Technical, for the first time in its history.

Though his classroom performance was less than impressive, Torres was selected by the principal of Lehman to be Community Board District Manager for a day with James Vacca, initiating a relationship between the politician and the high school student that would shape Torres' life in the coming years.

After graduating, Torres began attending New York University with funding from the Higher Education Opportunity Program, which provides economic and educational resources to students from disadvantaged backgrounds to help them complete school.

In an HEOP promotional video made during Torres' first year at NYU, a confident and articulate young Torres spoke almost directly into the camera.

"Because I came from a single parent household, because I was born into poverty, generational poverty, I always grew up with a sense of worthlessness, with a sense of failure," Torres said with the same polished cadence and earnest expression that would later woo the members of his district. "I have found power in academia, I have found power in my mind."

Yet Torres did not return for his second year of college, and has not returned since. He said he left for personal and financial reasons, and does not regret the decision, but notes his year at NYU was "the most intellectually formative year" of his life. Still, he says, he learned what he needed in moot court.

Torres returned to the Bronx and began his internship as a staffer with newly elected Councilmember James Vacca. As Warneke recounts, the beginning was rocky, but Vacca's politics began to make an impression on Torres.

"He trained me to value constituent services as if it were a religion," Torres said, sharing stories of long hours walking the streets and talking with community members. "I cut my teeth at Jimmy's office." Torres uses Vacca's nickname when he talks about his former boss.

By all accounts, Torres has remained actively involved with constituents in the district he represents.

Early in his campaign, Torres visited Monterey Houses, a public housing project in the district, and met with the tenant association president, Isabel Matias, 80. Torres instantly won a vote.

"I have been in the area for 63 years and I've never before seen a councilman in my building," he said recently. "I barely even knew there were councilmen!"

Matias said that Torres had been a strong ally, and began listing the improvements the complex has received in Torres' first few months in office and programs for the community he has provided. Security cameras have been installed and unsightly scaffolding has come down. A free legal service was made available to the residents.

Warneke, who is now a District Manager in a Community Board District within Torres' Council District, is also enthusiastic about the young Council member's accomplishments.

Unsolicited, he pulls up emails from Torres staffers about a particularly badly cracked sidewalk. He excitedly talked about a public forum Torres held in a park to address nearby residents' concerns about rowdy barbecues.

Torres is often among the last officials to arrive at council meetings and public hearings. But unlike his early days at Vacca's office, it's the work that's making him late.

"I'm working even when I'm not in the office," Torres said of his schedule as a City Council member. "Even though the job is theoretically part time, you have to put everything into it."